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## Professor Pat McGorry condemns budget cuts to mental health services for low income and rural Australians

Australian of the year Professor Patrick McGorry has condemned the decision to remove social workers and occupational therapists ability to offer mental health services under Medicare. The move will hurt thousands of Australians.

From July, many Australians with mental health issues who access these services will no longer be able to claim back the Medicare rebate currently available, which will frequently mean they are unable to afford the service.

The Government has acted before finalising the Review of the Better Access program, which Budget papers reveal is to be completed only later this year.

Since 2006, the Better Access to Mental Health Services has enabled social workers and occupational therapists with specialised mental health skills and experience to offer services to clients referred from GPs. These clients have serious mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorders.

1,500 doors to early intervention mental health services will be closed at the end of June this year for vulnerable Australians with mental health issues, when social workers and Occupational Therapists are no longer funded to provide these services.

**Professor Pat McGorry, Australian of the Year 2010 and Executive Director Orygen Youth Health**, said "This budget has been a difficult one for people suffering a mental illness. To cut services to Australians who so desperately need them, especially in the already under-serviced rural and remote area, places the system under increasing strain. At a time of major new health investments, the Government has yet to explain why it is pumping all its precious fuel into acute health while mental health is left to run on fumes."

**Mental Health social worker Jan Alexander said**, "I've built a professional practice offering high quality therapeutic services at an affordable price to people with all kinds of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The Government's decision to take this away from people who need the service is atrocious, and my clients will be dismayed."

"Social workers provide a vital service to thousands of low income and rural Australians with serious mental health problems that assists to keep these people out of the expensive hospital mental health system, and reduces the risk of serious harm to themselves or others," said **AASW CEO Kandie Allen-Kelly**.



## Australian Association of Social Workers

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For immediate use

Social workers eligible for the mental health program are highly qualified and dedicated professionals, who are committed to offering quality services to their clients. They are all accountable through the profession's complaints management process, and all complete mandatory professional development each year. A survey of them revealed that:

- Over one-third are based in regional, rural and remote parts of Australia
- Many work in outer suburban areas
- Nearly 75% of them have over 10 years' experience in public mental health services.
- More than 60% of them offer bulk billing to at least some clients
- More than two-thirds (68%) of clients say they would be unable to access their services without Medicare funding

Over 1,100 social workers are currently eligible to offer clients a Medicare rebate for mental health treatments, and together they provided 121,540 services to people in 2008-09.